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SENATORS PUT OFF STRICT CENSORSHIP URGED BY REAGAN

Move Would Bar Enforcement by Limiting Funds—House Passage Is Expected

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 20 — The Senate voted today to block until at least April 15 President Reagan's new system of lifelong censorship for more than 100,000 officials handling highly sensitive information.

The 56-to-34 vote in the Republican-controlled chamber was considered a mild rebuff to the Administration and signaled rising concern in Congress about Mr. Reagan's directive of March 11 to protect national security secrets by expanded use of censorship and polygraph testing of officials.

The measure approved today, which supporters said would probably be adopted by the House as well, would apparently force the Administration to stop putting into effect its new requirement that officials of the Defense, State, Justice and other departments who handle highly classified "sensitive compartmented information" sign agreements consenting to "prepublication review" by Government censors of their writing for the rest of their lives.

Distribution Has Begun

The Administration has already begun distributing such agreements to be signed, and some of the more than 100,000 employees with access to "sensitive compartmented information" may have signed them already.

The effect of the language adopted by the Senate today was not entirely clear, because it would block the Administration only from carrying out a policy of requiring Federal employees to submit to censorship "after termination of employment with the Government."

Thus, the Administration would apparently remain free to censor people who handle sensitive information while they are with the Government. But it would apparently not be free to proceed with its plans to require employees to sign secrecy agreements consenting to submit to censorship even after they leave office.

The March 11 directive also called for vastly expanded use of polygraph, or lie-detector, examinations in investigations of unauthorized disclosures, or "leaks," of classified information to members of the press and others.

While the amendment adopted today would not affect the Administration's use of polygraphs, another measure that limits the Defense Department's use of polygraphs was passed earlier this month.

President Reagan says he has the authority to carry out his secrecy order without approval by Congress, but he has not so far challenged the power of Congress to block the order by adopting new legislation.

The measure limits the authorization for various Government departments to use funds appropriated by Congress for the purpose of carrying out the censorship program.

"Sweeping Prior Restraint"

Today's amendment, sponsored by Senators Charles McC. Mathias Jr., Republican of Maryland, and Thomas F. Eagleton, Democrat of Missouri, and supported by such key Republicans as Charles Percy, chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, was adopted as an amendment to the State Department's authorization bill for the fiscal years 1984 and 1985.

Mr. Reagan's directive, Mr. Mathias said in floor debate today, would create "a system which would allow the officials of one Administration to censor the writings of their predecessors." He said the prepublication review requirement amounted to "a sweeping program of prior restraint, a restriction on free speech which could pass muster under the First Amendment only if compelled by the most extraordinary circumstances."

Senator Mathias said the purpose of the amendment was to give Congress time to hold hearings on the Reagan directive, which the Administration put into effect without consulting Congress, and not necessarily to block it permanently.

Opponents of the amendment did not offer a detailed defense of the censorship program, but, rather, suggested that any problems could probably be worked out with the Administration without any legislation blocking it. Senator Jeremiah Denton, Republican of Alabama, stressed "harm to the United States" that had been caused by unauthorized disclosures of classified information.